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46

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Building an Islamic Feminism: Contrasting Beauvoir and the work of Amina Wadud
By Sarah Mohr

We must remember we are women born,
By mightier than ourselves, we have to bear
These things—and worse. For my part, I will ask
Pardon of those beneath, for what perforce
I needs must do, but yield obedience
To them that walk in power; to exceed
Is madness not wisdom.

Antigone[:]
"Then in the future
I will not bid you help me; nor henceforth,
Though you desire, shall you, with my goodwill,
Share what I do."

-Sophocles, Antigone (ed. Appelbaum 1993, 3)

Abstract
People of all religions are working around the world for greater rights for women. A crucial part of this process is dialogue between traditions about the causes of gender-based oppression. To understand Islamic feminism, people in the West must understand how the meanings of biology, gender and alterity differ in Islamic feminism from their meanings in traditional Western feminist theory. A comparison of Simone de Beauvoir's explanation in *The Second Sex* of the role of biology in women's oppression and Amina Wadud's hermeneutical arguments about women's role in Islam suggests that Islamic feminism should work based on assumptions that are internal to Islam.

Introduction

This paper discusses the starting place for Islamic feminism by contrasting a central point of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* with the work of Amina Wadud. Beauvoir's arguments for sexual equality in *The Second Sex* are secular, and start with

the assumption that biological difference is an inadequate justification for sexual inequality. Wadud's arguments are focused on assumptions that are internal to the Islamic tradition and drawn from the Qur'an. This paper argues that in Islamic feminism as a whole, as in Wadud's work specifically, the fact that sexual difference is insufficient grounds for women's oppression is not that relevant to Muslim women's liberation. A hermeneutic approach based on the Qur'an may prove more effective advocating the importance of women's liberation in majority-Muslim societies.

While Wadud is clear that she is not a feminist, her work is cited by most women writing on Islamic feminism and forms a foundation for Muslim women writing on women in Islam. Beauvoir, specifically in *The Second Sex*, likewise forms a crucial foundation for the work of feminists in Europe and North America, as well as women writing on feminism generally (Daly 1985, 56). Wadud refers to Beauvoir in her work, and many Muslim women writing on Islamic feminism refer to Wadud. Contrasting Wadud's work with Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* clarifies the different starting places of Western feminism and Islamic feminism. When this difference is contextualized within the history of colonialism within most majority-Muslim countries, the importance of grounding Islamic feminism within a Muslim theological framework becomes evident.

The question we are asking is what role does feminism have in Islam? Leila Ahmed's final statement in *Woman and Gender in Islam* reflects the hope that women in Islamic societies could benefit from feminism. She states,

> Perhaps feminism could formulate some such set of criteria for exploring   issues of women in other cultures, including Islamic societies- criteria that would undercut even inadvertent complicity in serving Western interests but that, at the same time, would neither set limits on the freedom to question and explore nor in any way compromise feminism's passionate commitment to the realization of societies that enable women to pursue without impediment the full development of their capacities and to contribute to their societies in all domains (Ahmed 1992, 248).

Ahmed's conclusion reflects a belief that a dialogue between feminism and Islam could further the development of the role of women in majority-Muslim societies.

The oppression of women is common to both the West and the East (Barlas 2002, 2). Modernity has been universally oppressive to women (Moghissi 1999, 78). But the oppression of women is not a feature solely of modernity. The oppression of women is a part of the development of Islam historically, as pre-Islamic practices that discriminated against women became incorporated into Muslim society (Ahmed 1992, 87). However misogyny, inequality, and patriarchy have often been justified by Muslims as Islamic

(Barlas 2002, 2). As a result, some ask if Islam and the Qur'an are inherently oppressive to women (Barlas 2002, 4-5).

Defining Islam allows Islamic feminists to disentangle misogyny as it is practiced by Muslims from normative Muslim theology itself (Barlas 2002, 5). Islam must be distinguished from the diversity of social customs of Muslim cultures (Wadud 2001, 166; Barlas 2002, 11). All forms of Islam rely on the Qur'an and *sunnah* (practices of the Prophet) and *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet). Amina Wadud states,

> The term Islam is itself thought to apply to many different things...the criteria we use to evaluate whether something is or is not part of Islam must be on the basis of the Qur'an, (the revealed word of God) and *Sunnah* (normative behavior of the person through whom that revelation was sent, the Prophet Muhammed) (Wadud 2001, 166).

The authenticity of any one practice or belief must be judged based on fidelity to the Qur'an and *sunnah* (Wadud 2001, 166). When a practice is not faithful to the Qur'an and the *sunnah*, many do not consider it authentic or Islamic.

The particular religious laws that govern many Muslim nation states vary from country to country, implying that they are not absolute and fixed, at least in interpretation, but rather culturally derived and open to multiple influences. Misogyny and patriarchy exist in Muslim culture and society as they appear throughout human society, but they are not Islam; they are not even Islamic. They are not a fixed set of standards ordained by God and given to the Prophet.

Because the oppression of women is a problem for human society (Wadud 2001, 67), women are working around the world to improve the civil and human rights of women and to increase the opportunities available for women to fully engage human society as free and equal persons. Feminism is characterized by its commitment to resist the oppression of women(Jones 2000, 5; Wittig 1992, 14). The liberation of women would mean full human rights for women, and the end of gender-based oppression (Jones 2000, 5). Feminist theory has been defined by the struggle for social justice for women and the liberation of women as well as the philosophical process of deconstructing gender (Jones 2000, 7).[14]

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[14] For purposes of this paper, gender will be used to indicate the social construction of the meaning of sex (Jones 2000, 8). Sex refers to the simple biological difference that distinguishes women from men (Jones 2000, 8). Sex is not the determining factor in the establishment of gender: rather, gender as constructed by any given society determines how people view the significance of sex, and, consequently, how society defines women (Barlas 2002, 13). For some feminists, the meaning of gender depends heavily on sex, for others it does not (Moghissi 1999, 3).

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49

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All women writing on gender do not give the same primacy to sex in the construction of gender inequality (Wadud 2007, 79). Western Feminists tend to link arguments about women's biological inferiority with patriarchal understandings of women's ontological inferiority. But many Muslim women argue that in the Qur'an and the *sunnah* the fact of biological difference does not support the theory that women are ontologically inferior (Barlas 2002, 134). Wadud argues that gender inequality has a hermeneutical explanation in Islam, not a biological explanation, and that androcentric readings of the Qur'an contribute to the oppression of women and are in fact misreadings of Islam.

While Beauvoir disputes historical arguments about women's ontological inferiority based on sex to defend arguments for women's liberation, Wadud begins with women's ontological equality with men, and women and men's equal agency before God to explain the need for social justice for women. A comparison of Wadud and Beauvoir's writing clarifies the key differences in the meaning of sex and gender for both many Western feminists and Muslim women writing on Islam.

Biology, Ontology, Alterity: Simone de Beauvoir

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," states Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, (Beauvoir 1989, 267). Her statement reflects her argument that women have been defined and determined by the way women are the Other in contrast to men's existence as the sole transcendent subjects in society, literature, history, and psychology. Beauvoir's work has had a great impact on feminist thought. She is widely cited by feminists writing on women and gender. Beauvoir assumes that the biological inferiority of women and the oppression of women are directly linked and that they comprise the basis of justifications for the oppression of women. This understanding has profoundly influenced Western feminism. She states that biology has served as a justification for the reduction of woman to a being who exists for man and not for herself. Biology, argues Beauvoir, has been interpreted by men to justify the oppression of women.

According to Beauvoir, men have drawn from biology the assumption that woman's nature is passive and inert, in contrast to the active male principle, and therefore inferior. She argues that the passivity of the female in coitus contributes to this assumption (Beauvoir 1989, 21). The sex act and conception thereof both indicate women's passivity and inferiority. Women are assumed to be dependent, inactive, and subjected to men because the act of copulation usually involved a motionless female being acted upon by the male. According to patriarchal worldviews, women's natural propensity for inactivity, as seen in intercourse, makes women unsuitable to engage life as fully human persons.

INTERRELIGIOUS™
DIALOGUE

50

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The other false explanation for women's subjugation to men, to Beauvoir, is that simply because women bear children, their responsibilities are thought to be limited to childrearing. Women are responsible for the continuation of the species because of their ability to give birth and therefore women have been expected to take responsibility for raising children, and to sacrifice all other goals in life (Beauvoir 1989, 23). Procreation is women's place.

Women's passivity in sex and centrality in procreation lead to the subordination of women. These two biological ideas are then used to justify the subjugation of women in accord with the self-interest of men. Women's status is enshrined as a natural, moral, and necessary consequence of biology. Men's status relative to women becomes fixed and eternal. After tracing the logic of the biological explanation for the oppression of women, Beauvoir denies it has any credibility. She says,

> These biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element in her situation…But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever (Beauvoir 1989, 33).

Despite the flawed nature of the argument that biology is destiny, historically the facts of biology have served to justify woman's oppression. Whether or not biology explains women's oppression, and Beauvoir claims it does not, historically men and women have certainly explained the division of the sexes and the subsequent division of labor with biological facts. Beauvoir assumes that the argument against privileging men over women can be refuted by establishing women's biology as insufficient cause for women's oppression.

Women's biological inferiority for Beauvoir has led to an understanding that woman is ontologically inferior to man. For Beauvoir, ontologically and morally woman is viewed as both an idol (Beauvoir 1989, 158) and a slave (Beauvoir 1989, 187), venerated and feared, but never the subject of her own experience. Her status as idol is representative of her death and life-giving capacities, her embodiment of the ongoing productive and destructive cycles of nature (Beauvoir 1989, 193). Her status as slave allows man to contain the uncontainable, uncontrollable forces of nature. Just as her divine existence as giver of life and death makes her sacred, and able to be appeased, coerced, and manipulated, her status as slave allows man to control her and subjugate her. Woman as idolized mother and giver of life and death, and woman as wife and subjugated dominated slave are both roles that serve to assuage man's fears, according to Beauvoir. Man's fear about his lack of control over nature and inability to establish

control over the awesome forces of nature is resolved through his possession of women (Beauvoir 1989, 197). Women are either glorified and protected from life (Beauvoir 1989, 235), or debased and excluded from life. Men alone become the transcendent subject capable of free will and agency, while woman is reduced to the Other, a being who exists for men, thought about and acted on by man; carnal, animal, fleshly, and recognized by man as a possession and an object (Beauvoir 1989, 165).

The ramifications of the views Beauvoir has described are various. The exclusion of women has made women so inferior to men that Virginia Woolf likens woman's role in society to that of a fun house mirror that serves to make men look better (Woolf 1989, 101). Women writing on the social oppression of women have pinpointed women's education as a crucial part of women's oppression. Any man could feel accomplished if literate because women were not able to read or write (Wollenstonecroft 1996, 100). Understanding that gender resulted from sex is an assumption that underpins concepts like the women as a commodity and sexual commerce (Irigaray 31,1985), or woman as a class within heterosexist society (Wittig 1992, 15). Beauvoir's arguments about the biological basis of women's inferiority and subsequent oppression greatly influence feminist thought. For many feminists, the accusation that biology is destiny has been true enough historically that it has given women's oppression a scientific basis (Irigaray 70, 1985).

Beauvoir concludes that in the modern world, changes in the social conventions associated with the sex act and childrearing based on the ability of women to be wage earners will lead to changes in the "moral, social, cultural and other consequences" of sex (Beauvoir 1989, 724-725). She states that humanity is a "historical development" and that there is no" physiological destiny" which determines the construction of gender roles in society (Beauvoir 1989, 716). Changes in the labor force and other economic considerations will resolve gender inequality in society and render obsolete the biological considerations that created women's oppression.

Hermeneutics, Ontology, Agency: Amina Wadud

Muslim women do not typically explain gender as based on sex. According to Wadud, there is a hermeneutical basis for women's oppression in Islam and she proposes a hermeneutical solution. If Islamic feminists want to unravel and discredit the theories that support sexual inequality, arguing that biological differences do not justify different treatment of men and women is insufficient.

Muslim women writing on Islamic feminism often comment on the core theme of biological difference for Western feminism (Moghissi 1999, 44). The centrality of biological difference in Western feminism poses a problem for Islamic feminism because of the lack of support in Islam for gender inequality as a result of sex. Establishing

biological equality between men and women has no significant impact on the denial of women's civil rights in an Islamic context (Mernissi 1991, 19). The argument for women's civil inferiority does not begin from women's biological inferiority in Muslim society (Barlas 2002, 130).

Many Muslim women cite misreadings of the Qur'an to explain sexual inequality and the primary cause of women's oppression (Barlas 2002, 132-133). Wadud's argument against sexual inequality approaches biological difference hermeneutically, with the hermeneutic of *tawhid*. Wadud contends that biology is not a defining factor of human worth or rank in Islam (Wadud 2007, 46). Women's biology does not limit her full agency, her divinely mandated role of *khalifah* (agent, or trustee).

Most people who defend the Islamic tradition as pro-woman state that the places in the Qur'an where women's rights are differentiated from the rights of men are intended to restrict the abuse of women, not permit it. Moreover, many Muslims argue that Islam distinguishes women from men to protect women's interests (Barlas 2002, 198).

Although the differentiation of men from women in Muslim society is connected to sex, it is not an argument based on women's inferiority. In the cases where sex forms the central grounds for sexual inequality, it is the social implications of sex that have been used to justify the oppression of women, not merely biological facts.

Wadud argues that the widespread reading of sexual inequality in the Qur'an is in part based on the misapplication of specific verses to universal or general concepts, and the decision to abandon the central ethical principles of Islam, in particular the core value of *tawhid* (God's unity). She argues that using the Qur'an to justify women's inferior civil status relies on a misreading of the Qur'an that privileges an ethic of inequity and oppression over the ethic of the justice and human equality that appears throughout the Qur'an.

Wadud explains there are two types of verses in the Qur'an, *'am* (universal) verses and *khass* (specific) verses. She gives the example of the verse prohibiting the remarriage of Prophet Muhammad's wives after his death. She states this verse is unequivocally *khass* and that it is impossible to apply the verse in a general context, let alone a universal context (Wadud 2007, 196). Even universal verses cannot be applied literally and universally at all times. Moreover, even universal verses have to be re-evaluated and interpreted based on changes in cultural norms and the natural flux of society across generations and epochs. She notes that her interpretive method recognized that the intent of the "*'am,* general utterances [in the Quran], was their historical necessity in a particular time and location while the comprehension of the transcendent reality of the divine cannot be discussed in the boundaries of any human language as a symbolic meaning-making system," (Wadud 2007, 196). Wadud's point is that when people decide on a specific interpretation of scripture, they make a choice.

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

53

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While truth does have an absolute value, the multiple possibilities for each reading of scripture yields human understandings of truth dependent on interpretation. People make meaning based on their perception or preconceived conclusions about reality. No scripture can be limited to a single, clear, and specific truth.

In addition to the problems of universalizing specific verses, taking single verses as authoritative at the expense of greater themes of the Qur'an is a problem. The concept of God as the Just, or *Al-Adl,* has been used to justify the type of feminist apologetics that Wadud employs to discuss *'am* verses in the Qur'an. *Zulm,* translated as both oppression and injustice, is prohibited by the Qur'an (16:90).[15] Oppression goes against God's just nature and God's plan for human beings. Wadud argues that God's justice is incompatible with *zulm* and that any misogynistic interpretation of the Qur'an is *zulm.* Wadud's argument about universalizing specific verses is complemented by her argument emphasizing the ethical norms of the Qur'an. Wadud explain specific verses need to be understood as part of a greater whole. The hermeneutic of *tawhid* is partly about understanding Islam as a totality in order to support greater human rights for women (Wadud 2007, 15).[16]

Islamic feminism assumes that all persons are ontologically equal. This is in part because the Qur'an affirms the equality of human beings before God. Numerous verses in the Qur'an affirm members of both sexes as equal before God. They are both judged by their deeds, not their gender.

Wadud insists that despite patriarchal interpretations of primary texts of Islam, there is no distinction made between men and women in relation to their spiritual capacities (Wadud 1999, 34). She states, "There is no indication that the Qur'an intends for us to understand that there is a primordial distinction between men and women with regard to spiritual potential," (Wadud 1999, 35). The ontological equality of men and woman in the Qur'an is not only a theme of Wadud's work, it is a common theme for many Muslim women writing on women in Islam.

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[15] Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition. (16:90)

[16] Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of the most well-known women writing on Christian feminism and her approach to scripture reflects the same commitment to the ethical norms of justice and human dignity. Whether any verse is an article of faith or not relies greatly on the system within which the verse is understood. Ruether states, "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive (Ruether 1983, 18-19)." Ruether's work is based on a particular hermeneutical approach that places the utmost emphasis on women's rights to freedom, dignity, and physical safety. Wadud, like Ruether, has developed a hermeneutical approach based on theses moral imperatives.

The oneness of God is the major theme of the Qur'an. Monotheism is the central concept emphasized in Islam. All of creation is defined in contrast to the Creator. *Tawhid*, the oneness of God, is the core teaching of Islam as a religious faith. The Qur'anic story of creation supports the transcendent unicity of Allah over all creation, rather than a mere hierarchy where God rules man and man dominates woman (Wadud 1999, 26).

Wadud's hermeneutic of *tawhid*, an exegetical approach to the Qur'an that emphasizes the unity of the text and therefore prioritizes the deeper and more essential concerns of the text such as the oneness, justness, and goodness of God, allows the reader to de-emphasize verses that marginalize women by placing them both within their historical limits as well as limiting their misuse by devaluing them as primary. The hermeneutic of *tawhid* also highlights Wadud's emphasis on women and men's equal *khilafah* (agency).

Wadud's argument about the inconsistency of women's inferior status in Muslim society and woman's equal status before God is clear in her argument about woman as *khalifah* (agent and trustee) (Wadud 2007, 33). Wadud argues that throughout the Qur'an men and women are equally described as trustees who are responsible for the trusteeship of creation. "The unifying principle of Islam, according to the Qur'an, is the notion of the human being based on a relationship with the divine; more specifically, the concept of *khalifah*, moral agency, the ontological purpose for all creation (Wadud 2007, 80)." The concept that people are God's trustees on earth is framed by Wadud as a fundamental piece of God's plan for creation, central to the Qur'an and to Islam. The Qur'an states that it was the intention of God to make all human persons equally trustees (Wadud 2007, 33).

Wadud's hermeneutic of *tawhid* makes the ontological equality of men and women central to her understanding of gender equality in Muslim society. While explaining the marginalization of women based on patriarchal readings of the Qur'an, the hermeneutic of *tawhid* also makes values like God's justice primary and contextualizes specific verses that differentiate men and women based on sex. The hermeneutic of *tawhid* supports what Wadud calls gender mainstreaming, or the inclusion of women in all realms of Muslim society. She argues that the hermeneutic of *tawhid* and the values it delineates must influence public policy and reframe the way understandings of gender affect Muslim women's lives to establish social justice (Wadud 1999, 102-103, Wadud 2007, 96-97).

The importance of an Islamic Feminism

Why does the idea of using feminism, a Western concept about the basis for gender inequality, in conjunction with Islamic explanations, make sense? It seems almost

55

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counterintuitive after looking at how the starting place of Western feminism is so different from that of Islamic feminism. It makes any conversation about Islam and feminism seem impossible. Many Muslim women writing on Islam go out of their way to state that according to Islam women and men are ontologically equal because of their equal *khilafah* and their mutual total dependence on God, unlike Western feminism which emphasizes the ontological inequality of men and women based on biological justifications of women's inferiority. Muslim women writing on women in Islam also state that traditional feminist theory is not helpful in explaining gender based oppression in Islam.

In addition to the differences in the ways of understanding and framing gender in Western feminism and Islamic feminism, describing women has additional problems in Islam. The importance of using a Qur'anic concept like the hermeneutic of *tawhid* to frame gender equality is reinforced by the way Europeans during colonialism linked women's other-ness in Islam and Islamic misogyny and Islamic inferiority. The dearth of opportunities for women and rights for women supported European understandings of Islamic inferiority. In response, Westernization was and is joined to feminism and the destruction of Muslim culture. While modernization is seen as necessary, the subordination of women to men is often linked to Islamic identity and becomes synonymous with resisting Westernization and changes in traditional culture.

Haideh Moghissi describes the unfavorable portrayal of the "Orient", and Muslim culture in the Orient, as a representation in the interests of colonialism. "The domesticated, subjugated, unenlightened Other as opposed to the liberated, independent and enlightened Western self was used as a moral prop to legitimize colonial power relations,"(Moghissi 1999, 15). Woman's status as other in Islam was complicated by the Orientalist's depiction of Islam as other. Conceding that women were debased as a result of Islam was part of the justification for colonialism. To avoid being complicit in Western colonial domination any Islamic feminist epistemology must account for the other-ness of Muslim women both as women and as Muslims during colonialism.

Ahmed likewise describes the way women's other-ness in Islam was used as an argument for Islamic inferiority. She describes in particular the way that in Egypt the introduction of European feminist ideas such as educating women and unveiling, made the process of colonization synonymous with the work for women's rights. Ahmed describes the oppression of Muslim women by Muslim men, and the liberation of Muslim women as being linked by the Victorian colonial establishment. She says,

> The idea that Other men, men in colonized societies or societies beyond the borders of the civilized West, oppressed women was to be used, in the rhetoric of

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56

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colonialism, to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples (Ahmed 1992, 151).

The concept that the backward Oriental man needed to be restrained from oppressing the Oriental woman served to justify the destructive power of colonialism. The issue of women's rights became linked to the destruction of Muslim culture.

Conclusion: Contrasting Beauvoir and Wadud

Many of the central challenges to feminism contributing to the improvement of Muslim women's lives are framed by the differences between Beauvoir and Wadud. Beauvoir argues about biology, women's inferiority and women as Other. Her critiques of biological arguments for gender inequality are resolved with visions of economic power for women. Religious arguments are not central to her discussion. Wadud builds her arguments for gender justice on hermeneutics, women's and men's equality ontologically, and women's and men's equal agency in Islam. Her arguments are faith-based in the sense that they take seriously the central importance of religion for women's experience. Her call for gender equality draws on her arguments about God's just nature and God's purpose for men and women.

The goal of feminism is to establish equal opportunities and better lives for women. This goal, the goal of human rights for all women, is a common goal for women around the world. However, the contrast between these two thinkers shows the limits to Western theory as a defense of women's rights in Islam. The legacy of Orientalism and colonialism further detract from Western feminists' ability to provide theoretical support for women's rights in Muslim society. The major contribution of Western feminism to the theoretical grounds for Islamic feminism then is the shared goal of all feminists of better lives for all women, and ending the oppression of women.

Many Muslim women writing on Islamic feminism reject the central starting place of feminists like Beauvoir who see biological difference as the foundation for the social inequality of men and women. Western feminism can still contribute to Islamic understandings of the mothering, language, art, love, freedom, the erotic, heterosexism, and other areas of human experience in spite of the need to start from assumptions that are not part of the Western feminist tradition. The work of "jamming the theoretical machinery itself" (Irigaray 78, 1985) is still valuable and grounds for dialogue.

Gender is established for Western feminists, particularly Beauvoir, through assumptions based on sex. In contrast, Islamic feminists assume that there is a hermeneutical basis for gender roles and sexual inequality in Muslim contexts. Muslims need to continue to develop an explanation of gender-based oppression to further the process of establishing gender equality in Islam. Other concerns such as understanding

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DIALOGUE

57

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the double bind of Muslim women in relationship to their other-ness as both Muslims and as Muslim women, as well as the restrictions on Muslim women's lives due to traditional family roles will also serve to further illuminate the potential changes needed to facilitate Muslim women's full engagement in human society.

This comparison highlights that Islamic feminism needs to start from assumptions internal to Islam. While Muslim women share with all feminists the values of justice and human dignity for all women, any epistemological approach to the "ontology of being" (Wadud 4, 2007) in Islam has to start with "intra-Islamic ideas" (Wadud 16, 2007). As Wadud states, "Any comparative analysis with secular Western theories or strategies for mainstreaming women in all aspects of human development and governance is coincidental and secondary" (Wadud 16, 2007).

58

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